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ABSTRACT

Students in a language arts methods class work in learning teams in literature circles. They read novels, keep journals, and use a variety of strategies in exploring the novels and relating the authors' work and ideas to their own lives. Occasionally, the group is asked to develop questions which they would like to ask the author. Invariably, students who are touched deeply by the novel want to know what motivated the writing. Students feel a connection with serious writing. The serious writer, who probably begins as a serious reader, needs to be "fed." Reading and writing are reciprocal; they feed each other. Seventy-four undergraduate elementary education students, asked about what they had read over the summer other than course work, identified magazines (50%), children's books (40%) and newspapers (35%) most often, but of these categories, 50% to 65% reported reading "None" while other types of reading scored significantly lower. When asked about their writing, they pointed to letters (60%) and little else. Because the hectic life of schools leave students with little time to read and write, the schools need to become quiet havens for reading and writing. Motivating student interest in family history can prompt reading and writing. Exposure to serious writing can help reduce student passivity. Good books arouse good storytelling. The language and the story in a good book act as a catalyst to draw out students' and teachers' humanity and love. (SG)

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Becoming Serious Writers/Readers: Providing Encouragment and Contexts for Learning

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I want to open with a piece of serious writing by Charles Doss. He grew up on the banks of the Wabash. He could have been any one of those children who move several times a year from school to school, unfed, seemingly uncared for, looking to his classroom and his teacher for safe haven, for a place to live another kind of life. Doss's publisher (Luce, 1979) writes,

> Three Aprils ago, a friend of mine sent me a published essay by Charles Doss. She enclosed a rather terse note which read simply, "Dear Bill, If you don't write to this man, I'll never speak to you again. Love, Ruth."
>
> Well, I did write to Charles Doss. And, in the tradition of a good many literacy correspondents, we became friends. . . I Shall Mingle is the manifesto of a man who refuses to be divorced from humanity. "In this prison cell," he writes, "I am highly resolved that I shall touch mankind, that I shall mingle with the thousands." . . . Through the written word, Charles Doss is accomplishing his resolve" (p. xii)

Doss (1979) himself wrote an essay in this first book on "Loving Children." In the essay was the following poem:

> A little child unfurls slowly
> To a magic world, filled with wonders
> If you are his mother
> You are teh first, most and best he knows
> Of warmth, tenderness and safety.
> You are his prototype of Love.
> If you are his father
> You are a being eighteen feet high
> Who fills up all the earth

With incredible dimensions.
If you treat him cruelly, or with indifference,
The child will dwell thereafter
In a cold and barren world,
Bereft of love and charity.
If you treat him wisely
With humor, compassion, solicitude
His life will be a season of splendor
Replete with angels of love and benevolent giants.
Cultivate sagely this magnificent blossom
That God has endowed you with (p.32).

Later in the same essay, Doss reveals something of the personal background of the poem.

> In this prison, this bleak world of bars and anguish, I peer often out of my cell and across the years.
>
> My parents were simple country people. My father was a coal miner, and my mother could barely read. They were forty years old when I was born, and I came as a cruel suprise. I love my memory of these people, dim as it is, but I am no longer ashamed to say that I was not wanted, and I was not loved.
>
> I remember nothing at all from the first nine years of my life. I have erased everything except one or two incidents. My first authentic memory is of being embraced by my fourth grade teacher who like story I wrote. That is a powerful memorym bound up with lavender and silk. It intrigues me to guess that I am a writer this hour because of a casual embrace that was conferred upon me one time by Miss Ruth Hollenbeck and caused me to spring alive (p. 35)

We don't know anything about Miss Ruth Hollenbeck. Doss doesn't tell us any more. But she knew something about "receiving a child's writing," something which, as he says, "Caused him to spring alive." Perhaps she

recognized serious writing, perhaps she was a writer herself.

I will focus on four aspects of my topic: recognizing serious writing, feeding serious writing, encouraging it, and doing serious writing ourselves.

Recognizing Serious Writing

The instinct for recognizing serious writing--we all have it. It's a response that is set in motion when two things happen: the writing rings true and it touches the reader in some profound way.

Few genres of writing touch me more than poetry. It has some alchemistic concentration of language that grabs the reader and says, "I am a wonderful piece. I am a serious piece. You have heard me before deep down inside yourself." Our common humanity gives us an instinct for connecting with serious writers in some profound way. That instinct for connection with serious writing carries us as readers. It's the essence of storytelling--that lived through experience of the listener or the reader. We want to know what caused it, what inspired it, where did it come from.

Students in my language arts methods classes work in learning teams in literature circles. They read novels, keep journals, do a variety of strategies related to exploring the novels and relating the authors work and ideas to their own lives and experiences. Every so often, I ask the

group to develop a couple of questions for that particular day which they would like to ask the author. Invariably, the first time during a novel that this questions comes up, the students who are touched deeply by the writing want to know what motivated the writing. Did this experiences happen to you or your family? Did you have to do a lot of research to write this book? After reading *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor, Christine wrote to her asking,

> As I read, I found several questions coming to my mind. First of all, I would like to know if this story is based on a true life experience of your's or your father's? I did read the author's notes and I remember that you said that your father told many wonderful stories. Is this one that he made up? Was your father your inspiration for the story behind the Logan family?

Kathy wrote to Katherine Patterson, after reading *The Great Gilly Hopkins,*

> In reading your biography, I was surprised to find that you had not been a foster child. Your insights into Gilly feelings that behavior seemed extrememly perceptive.

These questions and comments speak directly to the issue of **why** authors write. My students want to know what brought about this particular story. In other words, "We sense that you are a serious writer. You must have had some serious experiences of your own to be able to write this. This came from your heart and touched my heart."

We can all recognize serious writing. Now how do we, as teachers and fellow laborers at writing, feed serious writing in our classrooms.

Feeding Serious Writing

Serious writers probably start out as serious readers. The written word has power over them. It speaks, it draws them, it takes them into other places and times, it helps them to be right where they are. The act of reading it a lived-through experience, as Karen Smith (keynote speaker at the conference) says. It's learning to love and to survive, yes, and to fail and sometimes to die with a character in a book. The written word, finely crafted or boldly raw, has immense power to let us experience another reality,--a created reality, a virtual reality.

Childhood reading experiences often lay the foundation for the serious reader and writer. As I survey my childhood memories,I realize that I bonded with books and my mother simultaneously. The Little Matchgirl, The Steadfast Tin Soldier, Lassie, Come Home spoke to the child in me of the bittersweet possibilities of a life nurtured by a caring parent. The dedication of my dissertation is: To my first and best teacher, my mother. This poem by Strickland Gillilan speaks to this parent/child foundation for reading and writing:

You may have tangible wealth untold
Caskets of jewel's and coffers of gold.
Richer than I you can never be,
I had a mother who read to me.

The serious writer needs to be fed. Reading and writing are transactional, reciprocal, they feed each other.

How well are do teachers feed themselves as readers and writers. Are our literate selves wasting away? Starving from lack of the written word? I decided last fall to find out how well my undergraduates were feeding themselves during leisure time. I took a little survey. My questions were: What did you read over the summer other than textbooks assignments? What did you write over the summer other than papers for classes? A simple survey, but a revealing one. The results were as follows.

Reading

Novels: 1 - 18%2 -18% 3-4% 4 - 4% 5 - 2% **(50% reported NONE)**

Newspapers: 35 % **(65% reported reading NONE)**

Magazines: 50% **(50% reported reading NONE)**

Children's Books: 40 % **(60% reported reading NONE)**

Inspirational Books: 17%

Psychology/self-help: 3%

Professional (education): 3%

"How-To" Books: 3%

The Bible: 3%

None: 5% (nothing but assigned school work)

The above figures are based on a survey of 74 juniors and seniors in enrolled in an elementary teacher education program. Teachers educators and teachers at all levels need to ask themselves: Am I nourishing myself as a reader? Do I love reading and books? Can I impart a sense of the wonder and joy of books to my students if I am not a reader? "I read children's books while browsing in the bookstore," as one student reported on the extent of her summer reading, does not convey the sense of commitment to the written word which seems necessary for the joyful teaching of reading.

The results of the writing survey were equally dismal.

Writing

Poems: 1 student

Letters: 60 %

Journal/diary: 7 students

Professional writing: 1 student

Job related: 2 students

None: 20%

One student reported filling out "Life Guard Assessment Forms" as a form of writing. Another interesting comment which perhaps reveals a tendancy toward "aliteracy" (though I CAN read and write, I choose not to) was the following: "Though I didn't write anything this summer, I received high ranking on writing portion of the National Teacher Exam."

If, in my survey, I has asked, "What television shows did you watch this summer", how many hours would have been accounted for? We do recognize our need to read and write, even if we aren't doing it. In another survey on reading conducted by my students with 250 adults, most reported, when asked what they would like to do better as a reader, "Read more!" These surveys are sad commentaries on our time constraints and the choices we make. These constraints extend to life in the classroom. The time, space, and energy demanded by reading and writing often find little fertile soil in the hectic life of schools. Our classrooms need to become quiet peaceful havens for reading and writing--workshops, yes, but peaceful sanctuaries, too, where children and teachers can be fed with

the written word. One way to begin movement toward reading and writing "sanctuaries" in our classrooms is look at classroom curriculum in terms of its potential for inspiring meaningful literacy activities.

Issues in Children's Literature.

In order to develop into serious writers, we must do some serious thinking, questioning, acting about issues that are hot for us, our neighborhoods, our world. In my summer courses and often during the school year, we begin with theme cycles on family. Discussing and recording family history, treasures, memories often results in serious writing for those involved. Many students have gained a new appreciation of family. They have started historical studies of their families and encouraged other family members to begin recording of the history and experiences of the family. They have begun the serious literary adventure of recording feelings and thoughts that had not been recorded before.

This curricular reformation contributes to a major task of the teacher. The task is well expressed in Lucy Calkins (1991) recent book, *Living Between the Lines.* She recognizes and documents the fact that teachers need to help children write well and live well. Writing is not confined to the desk, the office, the author's circle, the editing table. We need to move writing to the street corner, the hayloft, any and every

observation point which begs the author to record its secret and profound message. Any place which asks the author hard questions and gives difficult answer. It means becoming a writer yourself. It means exploring those unknown places in your own mind, your own family, your own daily perfunctory, but amazingly wise and telling literate occasions --incidents which beg to be told, which beg to wrapped in meaningful and beauftiful language for others to connect to.

New views of curriculum and the opportunities which meaningful reading and writing can afford may help us to counteract the emotional neutrality and student passivity are the norm in the American classroom (Goodlad). Good literature is the lifeline that makes experiences real and personal. We don't all have parents who have died, we haven't all been shipwrecked, or kidnapped. But books give us experiences which bring our writer's insides to life. The language and the story in a good book arouses our desire to share who we are and what we are with others in what we as humans do best: storytelling. We know stories, wonderful stories. They just need catalyst, a precipitator, something to draw out our humanity and love. As Calkins (1991) has said, our writings are "acts of intention, acts of hope."

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